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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AFTER THE FALL OF VAKARAI, GOVERNMENT
WORKS TO BRING BACK TAMIL POPULATION

Classified By: DCM James R. Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: An Embassy team that visited Vakarai on February 14 was the first group of foreign diplomats into the area since the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) retook the strategic coastal town from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last month. Demining operations and infrastructure improvements are underway and the GSL appears committed to resettling Vakarai's 15,000 residents, nearly all of whom are Tamil. Seventy-five percent are expected to be able to return by the end of March. The GSL is undertaking a hearts and minds operation with Vakarai's Tamil population, yet continues to believe that the island's conflict can be settled by militarily defeating the LTTE.
End Summary.

First Diplomats to Vakarai Since LTTE Defeat

12. (SBU) On February 14, DCM, PM/WRA program manager Deborah Netland, Defense Attache, and Poloff visited Vakarai to observe demining operations and assess conditions on the ground following the Sri Lankan military's successful campaign to wrest control of the area from the LTTE. Traveling by Sri Lankan military airlift, they were the first diplomats into Vakarai since the LTTE's 11-year hold on the peninsula was broken in late January following a three-month battle. The retaking of Vakarai represents a major strategic victory for the Sri Lankan military because the peninsula was the LTTE's last foothold on the east coast. With the fall of Vakarai, the LTTE lost its ability to bring ashore through the east coast corridor weapons and other equipment needed for its insurgency. The loss of Vakarai capped a series of recent setbacks for the LTTE. Military briefers in Vakarai claimed that 718 LTTE cadres were killed in the three-month campaign, including 11 senior LTTE members. They said that

2500 LTTE cadres operated in Vakarai, of which only 300 to 500 were "hard core", with the remainder being untrained, irregular fighters. They put Sri Lankan military casualties at 38 dead and 119 injured.

45,000 Internally Displaced Persons

13. (SBU) Prior to the fall of Sampur to the Sri Lankan military in September, the population of Vakarai was 15,000. Fighting in Sampur caused an exodus of 30,000 mostly Tamil internally displaced persons (IDPs) to Vakarai, swelling its population to 45,000 persons. Briefers repeated claims made frequently by the GSL that the LTTE sought to prevent civilians from leaving Vakarai, using them as "human shields." By mid-December, they said, the LTTE had largely lost control of the civilians, who walked 20 miles through the jungle to government-held territory, although 10,000 remained until near the end of the battle. Just before the final assault in mid-January, 5000 civilians remained. (Note: The ICRC at the time put the number at 9000.) The 45,000 IDPs are now in several of the 48 IDP camps elsewhere in Batticaloa District.

Town Inhabited Only by Soldiers and One Elderly Woman

14. (SBU) Located midway between Trincomalee and Batticaloa, the small, remote fishing village of Vakarai is today inhabited only by soldiers from the 23rd Army Division who work out of a modest municipal building. Just three weeks

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earlier, the same building had been the LTTE's base of operations in Vakarai. Our helicopter landed next to the makeshift command center, in a dirt lot looking out to the sea. Across the road is Vakarai's small hospital, abandoned and forlorn. Torn paper signs bearing the name and logo of the Italian Red Cross, which, under ICRC auspices, was the last organization to operate the facility, mark the entrance to the two-storey hospital. Only the most rudimentary equipment - mostly broken operating tables and cabinets - remains. A dozen uniformed nurses, who commute daily from Batticaloa, moved slowly around the vacant building in the mid-day heat, doing what little they could to prepare the hospital for patients who one day will return. Dozens of abandoned IDP tents are still pitched around the hospital and will be pulled down and removed as part of the resettlement process. The sole remaining civilian in Vakarai is a 78 year old woman, now cared for by the military, who was left behind by her daughters when they fled the fighting.

15. (SBU) Vakarai town, which stretches for about a mile along a dirt road that parallels the sea, has a languid, lost feeling. Its inhabitants eeked out a living from fishing, subsistence agriculture, and hunting animals and cutting wood in the surrounding scrub and the more distant jungle. There were beach hotels in Vakarai in days gone by, but they were abandoned when the LTTE moved in and took over more than a decade ago. What remained of the hotels was washed away two years ago by the tsunami, which hit the east coast with full force. The beach is unspoiled and stunningly beautiful, with potential for new tourism development should peace in the east take hold and last.

Hospital Damaged by Tsunami, But Not Military Fire

16. (SBU) Parts of the hospital and adjacent staff quarters were damaged by the tsunami and never repaired. We saw no evidence of battle damage to the hospital. Virtually all the houses we saw were intact and undamaged. The only buildings that showed the impact of battle were a handful of houses

that, according to our military escorts, were used as bunkers and operation centers by the LTTE. Our briefer, Brigadier General R.M.D. Ratmayake, Commander of the 23rd Army Division, emphasized that the military's goal in Vakarai was "zero civilian casualties." (Note: The Ambassador weighed in on three separate occasions with Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa during the Vakarai campaign to urge that exceptional measures be taken to avoid civilian casualties, which had marred other recent military operations by the GSL.)

Rapid Resettlement Is High Priority

17. (SBU) Undeterred by the spartan facilities and lack of electricity, Brigadier General Ratmayake provided a generator-assisted power point presentation on resettlement goals and demining operations in Vakarai. DCM opened the discussion by welcoming the GSL's efforts to resettle displaced civilians in the east as quickly as possible. He noted that mine clearance is an important component of this effort and that the U.S. is pleased to have assisted Sri Lanka in developing a humanitarian demining capability. He stressed the importance of displaced persons from Vakarai and other areas in the east being permitted to return home so that the original ethnic balance can be restored.

18. (SBU) Ratmayake responded that the rapid return of civilians to Vakarai and other parts of the peninsula

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following required mine clearance is the 23rd Division's highest priority. He outlined the GSL's plan to resettle all residents of the Vakarai area, a total of 15,967 persons (4043 families). They are divided into three groups. The first priority is the approximately 11,000 inhabitants of central Vakarai and eight small villages north and south of Vakarai along the coast. This area consists of 30 square miles and is the most densely populated part of the peninsula. The goal is to return these persons by March 6, although a subsequent briefer acknowledged that if additional demining personnel are not provided as scheduled, the first priority group will not be resettled until the end of March. The second priority is less densely populated, mostly inland areas and the third priority is the area around Panichchankeni, which is the most heavily mined.

Hearts and Minds Operation to Win Vakarai's Tamil Population

19. (SBU) Briefers noted that displaced residents will be allowed daytime access to their homes before actual resettlement takes place. The goal is to show them that their homes have not been damaged and encourage them to return. In cases where homes were damaged, the government will make an offer of funding for repairs and the owner will decide whether or not to accept the offer and move back. Fishermen from Vakarai who are living in an IDP camp seven miles away have been allowed to come back for the day to resume their shrimping operations. Briefers discussed plans to build new playgrounds, provide mobile medical units, and restore bus service within the area and to Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Work is already underway by road crews to repair the A-15, which runs north and south along the peninsula. The bridge at Panichchankeni that the LTTE detonated as they fled was, the briefers explained proudly, repaired by the military 36 hours later. Electricity will soon be restored to Vakarai.

Demining Underway with U.S. Assistance

10. (SBU) Battlefield area clearance (BAC) procedures to remove unexploded ordinance and mines are currently underway

in priority area one which is believed to be nearly mine free. Demining personnel were observed using USG-supplied equipment. Captain Kapila Perera of the Humanitarian Demining Team estimated that between February 1, when BAC commenced, and the day we visited two weeks later, 20 percent of priority area one had been cleared. BAC will be followed by humanitarian demining in surveyed heavily mined areas, and if required, in the BAC areas. Humanitarian demining will utilize dogs donated by the U.S.

War Footing Continues

¶11. (C) Comment: There is little doubt that the GSL, with its promises of new services and the infrastructure improvements already underway, is undertaking a significant hearts and minds effort in Vakarai. The question still to be answered is to what extent the Tamil population will choose to return, after living under de facto LTTE control for more than a decade. Our military briefers estimated that 80 to 85 percent of Vakarai's inhabitants will come back. Army Commander Sarath Fonseka, at a dinner he hosted for us back in Colombo that evening, made the same prediction. The good news is that the GSL appears committed to restoring the

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area's original ethnic balance and not imposing the settlement of non-Tamils. The bad news is that the government, flush with victory in Vakarai, ardently believes the conflict can be settled through militarily defeating the LTTE. General Fonseka told us over dinner that the military's campaign to break the back of the LTTE is at a critical phase. He predicted, without referring specifically to a northern offensive, that six months from now the military balance will look very different. He acknowledged that Thoppigala, an area in the jungle 20 miles from Vakarai (marked by a promontory that was clearly visible as we flew out) to which the LTTE fled after they were routed would be an early target. It remains to be seen whether the government will bring the same fervor to winning the peace and supporting long-term economic development in the east that it is currently demonstrating in prosecuting the war.

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